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St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia

**Adela A.  
Mirolevska**

**“A Man’s no Horse”:  
Reason, Language, and the “Thing  
which is not” in Jonathan  
Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels***

# **“A Man’s no Horse”: Reason, Language, and the “Thing which is not” in Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels***

The eighteenth century is known for the emergence of free thought, rationalism and critical thinking, and for the liberation of the arts and sciences from superstition. Jonathan Swift, being a devoted Anglican, was also a formidable critic of the Enlightenment thought, making his skepticism of modern learning a major theme in his writing. In *Gulliver’s Travels* Swift challenges the idea that truth can be empirically defined by a simple collection of facts, and he argues that humans are not rational animals. In a letter to Pope, Swift wrote that he has material towards a treatise proving the falsity of that definition *animal rationale* and to show it would be only *rationis capax*, i.e. capable of reason. This is especially evident in Part IV, in the land of the Houyhnhnms. I will focus on this last part of the Travels and will compare it to the empirical philosophy of John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. My aim is to discuss Gulliver’s shift to madness, following his inability to internalize the perceptions of the societies in which he happens to find himself and his irrational aspiration to become one of the “horses”. The current paper will concentrate on the interplay of truth and lies, central to Swift’s writing and language, as the tool for achieving a subtle irony, enhanced by Gulliver’s obsession with truth, self-deception, and constant contradictions. Arguably, the target of Swift’s satire are not lies, but the denial of lies and the pursuit of reason at all costs.

## KEYWORDS

**Gulliver, Swift, Enlightenment, empiricism, reason, Houyhnhnms**

## NOTE

“A Man’s no Horse” is a quotation taken from a poem called Hudibras, by Samuel Butler. In this poem the hero would “undertake to prove, by force | Of Argument, a man’s no horse” (Butler 1663-1678, l. i. 71-72).

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Jonathan Swift's 1726 book, *Gulliver's Travels*, is written as a parody of travel books. However, this is only the outer shell of a deep, satirical exploration of the human creature. Jonathan Swift was a formidable critic of the Enlightenment thought, therefore it is not surprising to find his skepticism of modern learning a major theme in his writings. In *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift challenges the idea that truth can be empirically defined by a simple collection of facts and responds to definitions of man as a *rational animal* (1726, Part IV, Chapter III). Swift's writing has provoked dispute and distress over a great number of issues, even among first-time readers, and this has been so ever since its publication in 1726. Indeed, what makes Swift's impact ongoing for almost three hundred years is his skillful use of language and subtle satire. The interplay of truth and lies is central in *Gulliver's Travels*, and Gulliver's obsession with truth, self-deception and the constant contradictions are all a tool used to enhance irony. But where exactly does Gulliver end and Swift begin? Answering this has been a challenge for scholars because the two are so strongly entwined, and because Swift was an ingenious hoaxer whose chief end in all his works was "to vex the world rather than divert it" (Swift 1725, in Wooley 2001, Letter to Pope, September 29).

## 2. THE SUBTLE ART OF LYING

Swift's obsession with truth is evident in all of his works. In 1708, under the pseudonym Isaac Bickerstaff, he wrote an almanac titled *Predictions for the Year 1708*, mocking the then famous astrologer Partridge by *predicting* his death (Swift 1708). In his political pamphlets he used satirical hyperbole to assert his criticism of modern economics and the British policy towards the Irish. In *Gulliver's Travels* he interweaves mendacity and veracity in a way that becomes more complex with every re-reading of the book. Swift plays with deception and assaults the reader's expectation from the very beginning – the opening gives an impression of truth, but is so quickly overtaken by the preposterous that the reader is left with a sense of uneasiness that will, indeed, haunt him until the very end of the novel. This feeling is evoked by the voice of a narrator whose "principal Design was to inform, and not to amuse" (Swift 1726, Part IV, Chapter XII) the reader, but also by a missing clear-cut distinction of moral opposites in the book (Martinez 2017) and the fact that Gulliver is not a reliable narrator. Despite his constant insistence on the truthfulness of his narrative as seen from the following lines: "Thus, gentle reader, I have given thee a faithful history of my travels for sixteen years and above seven months: wherein I have not been so studious of ornament as of truth." (Swift 1726, Part IV, Chapter XII), the obvious contradictions are yet another satirical tool.

But it quickly becomes apparent that Swift goes further than that. One reason for this conclusion is the fact that Gulliver *is supposed* to be an unreliable narrator. We can prove this by closely examining Swift's use of extratextual resources of front matter. In a later issue of the first edition of *Gulliver's Travels*, under the portrait of Lamuel Gulliver, a Latin quotation from the Roman poet Persius was added:

Justice and right blended with the spirit, a mind pure to  
Its inner depths, a heart steeped in nobility and honour. (n.d., ii. 74)

In the 1735 edition, that caption is changed to "Capt. Lamuel Gulliver Splendide Mendax. Hor." The Latin phrase originally comes from Horace's *Odes* (n.d., III. xi. 35) and means *lying magnificently* (Rawson and Higgins 2008). An exact opposite of the former, the latter implies the unreliability of the narrator. However, we cannot readily call Gulliver a liar. On the one hand, he is a gullible character and a great deal of the contradictions are owing to his misunderstanding. Still, there are enough examples of him admitting to lying, again, contradicting his constant claims of truthfulness. But it is exactly this lack of ability to rightly perceive the world around him that will be considered as Swift's target and later discussed.

### 3. OBSESSION WITH TRUTH IN PART IV

#### 3.1. ANIMAL RATIONALE, THE PERFECTION OF NATURE

Swift was a talented hoaxer and that is evident in the way he argues that humans are not rational animals. In a letter to Pope, he wrote: "I have got material towards a treatise proving the falsity of that definition *animal rationale* and to show it would be only *rationis capax*," (Swift 1725, in Woolley 2001) i.e. capable of reason. However, there is not much sense in this, as the distinction he makes implies some ideal use of the word "reason" that was never intended. And Swift was well aware of that. What he does is not directly responding to the truthfulness of the definition, but rather "rubbing in the fact that humans have no right to pretend to the virtues of high rationality" (Rawson 2014, 124). And he perfectly develops this in Part IV of *Gulliver's Travels*, in the land of the talking horses. The Houyhnhnms, etymologically "the Perfection of Nature" (Swift 1726, Part IV, Chapter III) – virtuous, reasonable, and incapable of lying, are an example of a high moral ideal. They are Swift's demonstration of what *animal rationale* really is and what man is not, nor can ever be. The choice to use horses as animals, superior to humans, is a purposely insulting parody of the logic textbooks where the definition derives from, which used horses as an example of the opposite to human, the non-rational animal.

### 3.2 LANGUAGE AND THE “THING WHICH IS NOT”

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The ability of language to deceive is something that comes up a lot in *Gulliver's Travels* and it is especially central to Part IV, in its relation to Reason and Nature. The Houyhnhnms have no word for lying, and to them it goes against reason:

For [the Master Horse] argued thus: "that the use of speech was to make us understand one another, and to receive information of facts; now, if any one said the thing which was not, these ends were defeated, because I cannot properly be said to understand him; and I am so far from receiving information, that he leaves me worse than in ignorance; for I am led to believe a thing black, when it is white, and short, when it is long." And these were all the notions he had concerning that faculty of lying, so perfectly well understood, and so universally practised, among human creatures. (Swift 1726, Part IV, Chapter IV)

We learn that Gulliver is aware of how widespread this vice is among human beings and this has ironic consequences for him. In his fanatical worshipping of the Houyhnhnms, and his attempt to become *one of the horses*, he develops an obsession with truth:

But I must freely confess, that the many virtues of those excellent quadrupeds, placed in opposite view to human corruptions, had so far opened my eyes and enlarged my understanding, that I began to view the actions and passions of man in a very different light, and to think the honour of my own kind not worth managing; which, besides, it was impossible for me to do, before a person of so acute a judgment as my master, who daily convinced me of a thousand faults in myself, whereof I had not the least perception before, and which, with us, would never be numbered even among human infirmities. I had likewise learned, from his example, an utter detestation of all falsehood or disguise; and truth appeared so amiable to me, that I determined upon sacrificing every thing to it. (Swift 1726, Part IV, Chapter VII)

But his frequent claims to the reader that he is "chiefly studious of truth" (Swift 1726, Part II, Chapter I) are nothing more than a goal he could never reach. The constant contradictions and some obvious lies, such as when he tells the Japanese Emperor that he is a Dutchman, are the harsh proof that man can never reach that high moral ideal. They are a form of Swift's mockery against the pursuit of truth and reason at all costs, and an open attack on scientists and the Enlightenment.

### 3.3. EXTREME OPPOSITIONS

It seems like Swift's chief purpose is to make the reader uncomfortable by attacking his, and mankind's, pride. He goes on by introducing the Yahoo species – dreadful creatures devoid of reason, an opposite extreme to the Houyhnhnms, yet dramatically resembling man. Rawson (1991) argues that, while the Houyhnhnms are an insulting impossibility, the Yahoos, though not a reality, are an equally insulting possibility, in the sense that their primitive and barbaric nature is a reminder of the same brutish potential of humans. Gulliver struggles to find his place in this extreme opposition, and although mankind falls somewhere in between – as it is at the same time capable of reason, yet not *reasonable* -this is everything but comforting. As he talks to the Master Horse, Gulliver comes to realize that “instead of reason [men] were only possessed of some quality fitted to increase [their] natural vices” (Swift 1726, Part IV, Chapter V) and that

although [the Master Horse] hated the Yahoos of this Country, yet he no more blamed them for their odious Qualities, than he did a Gnnayh (a Bird of Prey) for its Cruelty, or a sharp Stone for cutting his Hoof. But, when a Creature pretending to Reason, could be capable of such Enormities, he dreaded lest the Corruption of that Faculty might be worse than Brutality itself. (Swift 1726, Part IV, Chapter V).

In other words, men only use their reason to make themselves worse, hence men are possibly worse than the Yahoos. This notion serves Swift's purpose – to insult and to vex the reader, but also the narrator. Gulliver's irrational reactions to the society he finds himself in are a satirical illustration of the consequences of man's extreme aspiration for high morality and reason. The Houyhnhnms represent an impossible moral ideal – they need no laws, for their virtues are natural, unlike man, whose natural vices ought to be restricted by laws:

That, our Institutions of Government and Law were plainly owing to our gross Defects in Reason, and by consequence, in Virtue; because Reason alone is sufficient to govern a Rational Creature; which was therefore a Character we had no Pretence to challenge... (Swift 1726, Part IV, Chapter VII)

## 4. A MAN'S NO HORSE

### 4.1. HORSES AND EMPIRICISM

According to the Houyhnhnms, a reasonable creature needs no

laws to govern his actions, something impossible for humans who are ruled by emotions. This is easily an attack on science and the thinkers of the Enlightenment who seemed to rely more on logic and reason than emotions, but were nevertheless humans, too, and worked for personal gain and out of pride. In Swift's view they were directing their experiments towards an impossible progress, aiming at an impossible expansion of the human knowledge. This impossibility is exemplified by the Houyhnhms, as previously mentioned, but also by the contrast drawn between them and Gulliver – who, in the novel, serves as a mirror to man. We could read this part of the *Travels* as a parody of John Locke's empirical philosophy, in particular. This work was chosen because it represents the ideas stated in this paper well. In his 1689 *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke claims that truth can be empirically defined by a simple collection of facts and the use of reason to correctly connect the perceptions and build a system of knowledge. He puts great emphasis on reason and, when discussing morality, he argues that, with the right use of it, we could come to a set of moral rules, universally indisputable like those in Mathematics:

I am bold to think, that Morality is capable of Demonstration, as well as Mathematics: since the precise real Essence of the things moral Words stand for, may be perfectly known; and so the Congruity, or Incongruity of the Things themselves, be certainly discovered, in which consists perfect knowledge. (Locke 1689, Book III, Chapter XI, Section 16)

This is a brave idea, but rather naïve, and an example of what Swift pokes fun at when he describes the society of the Houyhnhms – the "Perfection of Nature" (Swift 1726, Part IV, Chapter III). What he says, and he does it in a painfully honest way, is that man is far from reaching that moral high, and the pursuit of it is dangerous and useless.

## 4.2. A SHIFT TO MADNESS

It is important to note here that *Gulliver's Travels'* aim is not to be a moral lesson, but rather an indictment, a criticism. Swift's anger seems to be provoked by what he considers a waste of effort that could have otherwise been put into effective solutions to problems and important discoveries. Therefore, the obsession with reason and pursuit of an impossible high mental state is harmfully useless, but also dangerous. The theme of the consequences has been brought up earlier in the paper, but will be further developed here. As mentioned earlier, Gulliver represents mankind as a whole, and for that reason his reactions, though exaggerated, are a bitter reminder of human imperfection. But the weaknesses of the character also imply defects in the empirical theory. Throughout the novel Gulliver lays

great emphasis on everything he sees, but is unable to establish a correct perspective of the world. He creates his own moral philosophy, which by the end of the book becomes profoundly misanthropic, to an extreme where he falls in a state of fanatical worshipping of the Houyhnhnms. In his aspiration to become one of them, Gulliver exposes his human weaknesses and loses his sanity. And this shift to madness is the dangerous consequence of reaching for something that is beyond reach.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Gulliver's obsession with truth, the uncertainty as to what his identity is, and the complete rejection of humankind, are all the result of his inability to perceive the world around him. And all of this is at the center of Swift's skillful satire, which uses Gulliver as a tool to exemplify the consequences of the denial of lies and the pursuit of reason at all costs. It is both a reminder that man has no right to claim a high morality, and an attack on human pride. Gulliver's drastic change in tone, his aggressive behavior, and arrogance towards the reader, are all results of a mental derangement, and his pride seems to be the root of the problem. He is incapable of accepting the truth about humankind, but also about his own identity. He is driven to an eccentric misanthropy and criticism of men: "the Yahoos were a Species of Animals utterly incapable of Amendment" (Swift 1726, A Letter from Captain Gulliver to His Cousin Sympson). He seems to still place himself above other people, and refuses to communicate with them. Instead, in his absurd desire to become one of the Houyhnhnms, he spends four hours a day in his stable, talking to the horses which, he says, understand him "tolerably well" (Swift 1726, Part IV, Chapter XI). This is by no means comforting to the reader, who is left, at the end, with nothing more, no alternative point of view, but an unreliable mad narrator. Although Swift is not Gulliver, his presence behind him is noticeable, and their resemblance easily recognizable. Some critics argue that this excessive behavior distances the satirist from his insane speaker; however, many have accused Swift of misanthropy, misogyny, and madness. In Samuel Johnson's (1811, 35) words, his "anger was heightened into madness." It still remains uncertain, to readerly discomfort, and a challenge for scholars to determine, where exactly Gulliver ends and Swift begins. But if humans are what the story says, this includes the narrator, the author, and, in Gulliver's words, you, gentle reader.



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